

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Retelling Nature: Realism and the Postcolonial-Environmental Imaginary in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Since its publication in 2005, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh has been the privileged vantage point that has defined the intersection of the large fields of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism.¹ Its thematic concerns – such as the interplay of land use, academic scientific enterprise, the long history of colonial settlement, state policies of environmental conservation, migration and refugee settlement, the overlapping of religious and state boundaries of Hindus and Muslims, subaltern and indigenous populations – have made it the originary text for scholars to work through key debates and ‘mutually constituted silences’² between the two influential fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism.³

As Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee puts it, this novel ‘tells the tale of belonging through a meditation on the issues of language, representation and mimetic techniques that can be read as a meta-textual commentary on the form of his postcolonial novel itself.’⁴ Where this current essay seeks to be different from the existent large scholarly corpus on *The Hungry Tide* is through shifting from a theoretical accounting of the novel, to a more internal aesthetically attuned reading. The elements of this essay negotiate the questions of how the complexity of such a rich historical situation can only be captured by a complex amalgam of realism, narrative, historical

¹ The distinguished scholarship on this intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism includes: Pablo Mukherjee, ‘Surfing the Second Waves: Amitav Ghosh’s Tide Country,’ *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 59 (2006) 144-157; Rajender Kaur, ‘Home Is Where the Oracella Are: Toward a New Paradigm of Transcultural Ecocritical Engagement in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,’ *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14.1 (2007) 125-141; Jens Martin Gurr, ‘Emplotting an Ecosystem: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and the Question of Form in Ecocriticism,’ *Local Natures, Global Responsibilities: Ecocritical Perspectives on the New English Literatures* edited by L. Volkmann, N. Grimm, I. Detmers and K. Thomson (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2010); Lisa Fletcher, ‘Reading the Postcolonial Island in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,’ *Island Studies Journal* 6.1 (2011) 3-16.

² Rob Nixon, ‘Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,’ *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* edited by Anita Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 235.

³ Though their disciplinary empathies are primed for alignment, the scholarship within postcolonial studies on the one hand, and ecocriticism on the other, have often skirted around the critical interplay of landscape and historical narratives. Postcolonial discourse has been criticised for a ‘wilful neglect of causation, context and chronology’ (Dane Kennedy, ‘Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory,’ *The Decolonisation Reader* edited by James D. Le Sueur [New York: Routledge, 2003] 15), a tendency to be ahistorical and for conducting reductionist readings that resolve into a rigid binary of colony and metropole. In response, postcolonial critics have pointed out that ecocriticism and environmental literary studies, as a predominantly Caucasian US-centric movement, tend to overlook colonial imperatives and are ‘arguably lacking the institutional support-base to engage fully with multicultural and cross-cultural concerns’ (Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* [New York: Routledge, 2010] 703). Considering that colonisation changed the very categories within which nature and society were conceived (William Adams and Martin Mulligan, eds., *Decolonising Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era* [London: Earthscan, 2003] 5), the emerging discipline of ‘postcolonial ecocriticism’ has been decisive. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that it performs ‘an advocacy function’ that ‘opens up for contemplation of how the real world might be transformed’ (13).

⁴ Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Novel in English* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 121.

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fiction, myth, intertextuality, and linguistic texture.⁵ The essay thus moves beyond suggesting that there is a simple representation of a range of multiple voices (the traditional social realist mode of representing everything from the metropole to the forest), to recognising that this representation of multiplicity will never be able to entirely overcome hierarchy. *The Hungry Tide* succeeds to the extent that it can represent, within the mode of a stretched social realism, both multiplicity and hierarchy. The many competing micro-narratives in the novel resist universalisation into the modes of either the ‘global-scientific’, or the generic ‘regional-subaltern’. I argue that it is the representation of this range of competing aesthetic and narrative registers that form the key political point of the novel – that the multiplicity of subaltern narratives are neither reducible to each other (the interest of the refugee is not the interest of the fisherwoman), nor can they be meaningfully universalised against a global, singular Other (be it of capitalism, or science, or the State).

Nature as the Absence of History?

Amitav Ghosh has often voiced his discomfort with the term ‘postcolonial’, calling it an essentially negative one and preferring to replace the word ‘postcolony’ with ‘place’, and discusses how typically a terrain gets defined as ‘nature’ and thus ‘the absence of history’.⁶ But where the place is burdened by colonial history, the negotiation between the two can be a slippery one. Set in the Sunderbans, *The Hungry Tide* explores one such compelling cusp of place and history. The Sunderbans, a tropical moist forest ecoregion located in the eastern fringes of India and extending into Bangladesh, which literally translates into ‘beautiful forest’, is an archipelago that hosts the largest estuarine mangrove forest in the world, a unique ecosystem of tidal waterways and islands that is home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, including a large population of tigers. Listed on UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites and declared a Biosphere Reserve for its exceptional biodiversity, the Sunderbans is also a fascinating geohistorical location, a landscape steeped in a plurality of narratives that encompass collective memory, oral traditions, mythologies, colonial legacies, scientific ventures, nationalist politics and environmental concerns.⁷

Situated in this vortex of nature, history and imagination are the protagonists of *The Hungry Tide*, characters from disparate worlds gravitating to each other: an American scientist, an urban Indian translator and entrepreneur, and a local fisherman, each having to contend with issues of identity and the forces of nature within the confines of this place. Piya, an American cetologist of Indian origins, has freshly arrived at the Sunderbans to conduct research on a rare species of river dolphins, the Irrawaddy dolphins, and sets off on her journey into the tidal labyrinth accompanied by a guard from the forest department who turns out to be unsympathetic,

⁵ Hamish Dalley discusses how certain literary modes, such as the investment in realism and plausibility, require readers to negotiate heterogeneous structures of reference, and reads the historical novel as a kind of allegorical realism. See Hamish Dalley, ‘Postcolonialism and the Historical Novel: Epistemologies of Contemporary Realism’, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.1 (2014) 51-67.

⁶ T. Vijay Kumar, “‘Postcolonial’ Describes You as a Negative: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 9.1 (2007) 99-105.

⁷ Annu Jalais writes about different interest groups and their investment in the rhetoric of Sunderbans as an exotic site of nature, deliberating negating the lived reality of its human inhabitants. See Annu Jalais, ‘The Sunderbans: Whose World Heritage Site?’, *Conservation and Society* 5.3 (2007) 1-8.

opportunistic and a barely veiled sexual threat.⁸ His job of protecting the environment seems devoid of any emotional connection with it, a stark contrast to Fokir, a local fisherman they encounter. This fortuitous meeting convinces Piya to proceed with Fokir as her guide, his use of personal experience and traditional knowledge to locate these shy marine mammals opening new and exciting possibilities for Piya's research.

Piya also meets Kannai, a New Delhi-based translator and language expert who has been summoned to the Sunderbans by his aunt Nilima to collect a manuscript addressed to him by Nirmal, her late husband. Kanai is attracted to Piya and offers his services as a translator. As Piya, Kanai and Fokir set out together in search of the dolphins, they are reminded by the constantly morphing landscape of the *bhatir desh*, the tide country, that they are at the mercy of the elements and wild animals. Piya observes that 'except at sea, she had never known the human trace to be so faint, so close to undetectable' (72). The entire dramatic action of the novel is contained within the ecological region of the Sunderbans, where the mangrove forests are a challenge to place-consciousness as the tides reconfigure the landscape on a daily basis for 'they do not merely recolonise land; they erase time' (43). This characteristic of the tide and the forest as a colonising and decolonising force, stronger than human intervention, echoes through *The Hungry Tide* like a leitmotif and attains fruition in the climax. It is a narrative webbed with such interminable colonial projections, that Ghosh's hesitation to define his work as 'post' the colonial experience becomes significant. If we are to read this in the light of Sluyter's approach to colonisation as a process of conflict between natives and colonisers over and through landscape,⁹ then the only way to approach place or nature is through the plethora of historical narratives, both by colonisers and the colonised. History is simply this plethora of narratives, not a singular narrative that privileges the dualism of oppressor and oppressed. Nature is linked to history as a chaotic, irreducible multiplicity of tellings and re-tellings.

Living the Scotsman's Dream

Traditionally considered an inhospitable terrain by the local population due to the constant erosion and deposition of land by the tides and a high density of predators, the tidal islands were repopulated by a Scotsman, Sir Daniel Hamilton, who bought ten thousand acres from the British government in 1903. This systematic and large-scale colonisation put heavy pressures on the fragile ecology of the Sunderbans. The end of colonial rule in 1947 did not end the colonial policies, which continued in the Indian administration's conservation efforts,¹⁰ and the region has continued to struggle with highly controversial land encroachments by refugees from Bangladesh and intensified human-tiger conflicts. The anthropologist Annu Jalais has referred to this time (the nineteen fifties to the seventies) as one 'when tigers became "citizens" and refugees "tiger-food",' and tigers became the excuse to exterminate people. To the islanders,

⁸ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) 30. Further references to this work will be included in the text as page numbers in parentheses.

⁹ Andrew Sluyter, *Colonialism and Landscape: Postcolonial Theory and Conservation/Development Applications* (Lanham, MD: Rowman, 2002) 12.

¹⁰ The national park management in India, according to Gadgil and Guha, has borrowed two axioms of the Western wilderness movement: 'gigantism' (cordoning off large areas) and 'hands off nature' (believing that all human intervention is bad for nature). See Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1993) 235.

tigers preying on humans is a direct outcome of the state violence against refugees, combined with the importance given by the State to the tiger (India's 'national' animal) compared to impoverished refugees from Bangladesh.¹¹

Relatively speaking, all human habitation in the Sunderbans being so recent, its inhabitants, whether from India or Bangladesh, are 'refugees'. In exploring the relatively recent history of human inhabitation in the 'treacherous' mangrove ecology, Ghosh juggles with the twin tropes of Wasteland and Utopia, both emerging from colonial encounters with landscapes. Sir Daniel Hamilton encouraged local people to repopulate the Sunderbans in the early twentieth century. In the novel, he is depicted on the prow of a liner during a reconnaissance of the mangroves asking, 'why is this valuable soil allowed to lie fallow?' (43), thereby representing the colonial ethos where 'the existence of vacated (or empty) landscapes, "new lands" and a frontier between them and settled, sown and developed country was important to the national psyche.'¹² Land became a wasteland when it did not serve the colonial motivations of profit, and this idea is reflected in Hamilton's logic and rhetoric in the novel. "Look how much this mud is worth," he said, "a single acre of Bengal's mud yields fifteen maunds of rice. What does a square mile of gold yield? Nothing" (42). Hamilton was not the first man to set foot in the Sunderbans. The islands showed signs of previous habitation by humans who had abandoned them due to the combined threat of weather and predators. By encouraging people to return and harness the natural resources, and by giving rewards to those who killed crocodiles and tigers, the new 'owner' of the land inscribes a new history upon it.

This arrival of the coloniser at a foreign landscape has generated the romantic myth of a virginal landscape offering itself to the newcomer's identity and aspirations. 'Under ethnohistoricism, the precolonial landscape thus remains largely pristine, a wild nature that determined the characteristics of natives and only became ordered when Europeans arrived to tame it.'¹³ While the validity of such an interpretation in deconstructing colonial influences is irrefutable, it also is in danger of overlooking individual compulsions. As Ghosh takes pains to elaborate, Sir Daniel Hamilton's motives in the Sunderbans are not entirely mercenary, but come from a passionate belief in a Utopian society where people could be free of the social inequalities and rigid caste distinctions deeply embedded in Indian society (44). While Ghosh may be critiqued for being insufficiently critical of the benign paternalism of the Scottish entrepreneur, the larger point to be gained may be that the novel, by giving historical depth, allows the reader to nuance the temporalisation of colonialism. For, far from being demonised by the natives, 'the visionary Scotsman was, if not quite a deity, then certainly a venerated ancestral spirit' (66), and this is acknowledged by characters like Nirmal and Nilima, who are familiar with both the burden of colonialism as well as the discourses of nationhood.

Nirmal is a schoolteacher, an idealist and a believer in revolutions, whose Naxalite politics lead to a relocation to the Sunderbans where he works for the welfare of the local community with his wife Nilima. He is predisposed to read Hamilton in the light of his own idealism, especially Hamilton's vision of an egalitarian society, of Sunderbans as 'a model for all of India;

¹¹ Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became "Citizens", Refugees "Tiger Food",' *Economic and Political Weekly* 23 April 2005, 1757-62.

¹² Adams and Mulligan, 35.

¹³ Sluyter 17.

it could be a new kind of country' (45). But do Hamilton's good intentions absolve him from the damage caused to the tidal ecology by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources and the assaults on non-human life forms? A natural corollary to this dilemma of colonial motives is the question of whether the colonised are all that different from the colonisers in how they wish to appropriate these 'wastelands'. In 1978, another large wave of human encroachment and settlement in the Sunderbans took place when political refugees from Bangladesh occupied Morichjhapi island, a critical dramatic event in *The Hungry Tide*. The novel forces the question of an invisible colonial hierarchy in human claim over landscape, as Nilima argues with Nirmal that allowing the Bangladeshi refugees into 'government property' would put their ecosystem at risk. She wonders, 'What will become of the forest, the environment?' while Nirmal would rather ask whether the dreams of the settlers were less valuable than those of Sir Daniel just because he was a rich saheb while they were impoverished refugees (177). Nirmal's decision to write down these thoughts, to record history as it is being created in the Sunderbans, becomes an act of resistance against the injustice being meted out to these homeless people. The trope of a diary within a novelistic narrative, recovered by a later generation, allows the instantiation of several temporal modes (of resistance, of diversity of subaltern perspective, as well as existential spiritual and romantic quests).

It is difficult for Nirmal to overlook the fact that these refugees are being persecuted because they occupy a land that has been declared a national park, and because they have a different national identity – Bengalis like him, but Bangladeshi instead of Indian. The constant shifting of the mangroves between a state of land and a state of water provides an objective correlative for the unstable past of its human residents.¹⁴ Irrespective of the geopolitical fencing, the people of the tide country had shared their knowledge of the swamps, whether for livelihood or spiritual sustenance, with more to fear from natural predators and ravages of weather than political leaders.

The Hungry Tide engages at length with the decision of the Indian government to relocate the Bangladeshi refugees in settlement camps in Central India, a completely different ecoregion, 'more like a concentration camp or a prison' (99). Unable to adjust to the unfamiliar conditions, many of them decide to move back to the Sunderbans, but still within Indian territories where they feel safe. They tell Nirmal about this lure for the familiar – 'rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood' (137) – and he understands why their return to the tidal islands is inevitable. The shared identity was of a bioregion, a common way of life and a common sensibility shaped by characteristics of the natural environment rather than by manmade divisions, hence more compelling and cementing than political borders or boundaries of a national park. 'They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood' (137). Nirmal's optimism about shared destinies is shattered when the Indian administration decides to forcibly evict the settlers, leading to a massacre. The tragedy of Morichjhapi, as Ghosh dramatizes it through Nirmal's notebooks in *The Hungry Tide*, is shown as stemming from a complete disregard of bioregionality and environmental consciousness. It is ironic that the Utopian ideals of Hamilton that promoted the harnessing of natural resources as an impetus to leveling social inequalities become instrumental in the persecution of the

¹⁴ Graham and Tiffin 187.

inhabitants of the tide country. Stylistically, the novel plays up the dynamism and entrepreneurship of an earlier colonial period, only to serve as foil for the later historical unfolding of forced migration, disruption and death.

Human–Tiger Coexistence and Conflict

The claims of different political and social groups over the landscape is further problematised in the novel by the conflict between the human and non-human life forms which, as Adams and Mulligan point out, is an aspect of colonisation that we are less accustomed to acknowledge.¹⁵ For people living in the Sunderbans, and for the characters of *The Hungry Tide*, the constant threat of man-eating tigers is a grave problem that cannot be ignored or escaped. Not only is there a viable population of tigers in the Sunderbans, these tigers are known to have a predilection for human flesh, unlike in other reserves where tigers attack people only in unusual circumstances.¹⁶ While there is no consensus about the reasons for this in the scientific community, the tiger is seen as a constant threat by those living in the Sunderbans.

Piya and Kanai, visitors from distant cosmopolitan centres, struggle to comprehend this reality. Piya, in particular, is prone to romanticising the connection that the local people have with their environment. Watching some fishermen and dolphins work together in rounding up a school of fish, Piya thinks to herself that it is the most remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals that she has ever seen (140). Her attraction to Fokir is based on an admiration of his knowledge of the outdoors, his ability to observe and follow the paths of the dolphins that she is desperate to track. But as the story unfolds and their journey takes them deeper into the tide country, Piya realises Fokir's connection with his environment exceeds her simple idealisation of 'man at one with nature'. This is especially foregrounded when the real threat of predators (tigers) has to be factored in.

Nilima warns Kanai about this and shows him records to prove that on both sides of the border 'a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans – at the very least' (199). In fact, the tiger is a sustained presence through *The Hungry Tide*, either by suggestion – a pug mark, a distant roar, a rustle in the bushes, a hallucination, a recollection – or through direct encounter.¹⁷

The tiger in India, particularly the man-eating tiger, had taken on a mythic status during British rule. John M. MacKenzie writes of how 'the British and the tiger seemed in some ways to be locked in conflict for command of the Indian environment', making it one of the species that was defined as 'vermin', which meant that it would be 'singled out as a prime enemy of mankind, its destruction might nonetheless only be undertaken by certain hands.'¹⁸ The foundation of this notion of 'protecting' the tiger, whose eradication not so long back was

¹⁵ Adams and Mulligan 52.

¹⁶ K. Ullas Karanth and Rajesh Gopal, 'An Ecology-based Policy Framework for Human-Tiger Coexistence in India,' *People and Wildlife: Conflict or Coexistence?* edited by Rosie Woodroffe, Simon Thirgood and Alan Rabinowitz (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005) 380.

¹⁷ Rajender Kaur considers the tiger in the novel 'a Blakean archetype of an awesome natural force that is amoral as much as the people who are pitted against it in an eternal battle of survival that expands our understanding of the indigenous and cosmopolitan beyond socialized spaces to hint at the elemental' (Kaur 136).

¹⁸ John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 18.

reserved only for the ruling class, thereby became suspect. Following independence, as India's national animal, the tiger has become a flagship species for conservation efforts and has also taken on the populist rhetoric of nationalist pride, its flagship status coming, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the time of its extinction. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the tiger population in India was estimated at 40,000 and by 1973 it had been reduced to less than 2000. In that year, the Government of India launched Project Tiger, and the tiger population has doubled since then.¹⁹ Reports have shown a simultaneous increase in the clashes between the people living in proximity to the national parks and the park authorities, as well as fatalities from animal attacks, for which most people are not compensated or are given only paltry sums.²⁰ The resentment in the local populace, mostly poorer sections of agrarian society eking their livelihood from these areas, over their interests being considered subordinate to that of the national park and the predators, has been vividly captured in *The Hungry Tide*.

Nevertheless, for dramatic purposes, Ghosh's novelistic form requires an initial alignment between the characters of Kanai, Piya and Fokir. This lulls the reader into thinking the novel has a vantage point from which to describe an objectified notion of the problems of environment and development. But the surprise and strength of the novel is that this initial alignment is shattered in a visceral way due to an episode of tiger-killing. Suddenly, the three protagonists realise they are not on the same side at all, and have radically different positions. This visceral dissonance is never resolved in the novel, and haunts its structure henceforth, as explained below.

As Piya, Kanai and Fokir travel through the waterways of the mangroves, they come across a village where a mob is attacking a tiger trapped in a livestock pen with spears and staves. Piya tries to intervene but Fokir forcefully carries her away from the wrath of the resentful crowd. The livestock pen is set on fire and the tiger is burnt alive. Piya is horrified and cannot believe that both Kanai and Fokir are so accepting of such brutality. Kanai tries to pacify her by explaining that the tiger had been preying on the village for years, killing livestock and people. But that can never be a valid explanation for Piya who tells him categorically that he can't take revenge on an animal. Kanai's refusal to interfere with the mob does not trouble her as much as Fokir's betrayal does. Having idealised him as a man sensitive to his surroundings, she had expected him to understand her distress rather than accepting the killing by saying that 'when a tiger comes to a human settlement, it's because it wants to die' (244). This kind of pragmatism does not fit into her romantic notions of his eco-sensibilities. She has to accept the truth when Kanai tells her, 'Did you think he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He's not. He's a fisherman – he kills animals for a living' (245). Fokir had represented to Piya the possibility of a harmonious relationship between human and non-human species, and the value of 'the imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves' (249). That line is crossed for her when she is a helpless witness to the tiger's death. She points out to Kanai that the violence caused by such entitlement as a species would not stop at killing the tiger, but would eventually lead to the killing of people, precisely the poor and disadvantaged people that he is advocating for.

¹⁹ William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 297-8.

²⁰ Guha and Gadgil, 234.

The dramatic treatment of the scene reiterates that there are no easy answers, that all voices have validity. Yet, the form of the novel precludes the view that they have ‘equal’ validity – for the construction, synthesis and juxtapositions of the varied subject positions (including that of the non-human world) suggest that there is no escape from taking responsibility, even if each subject-position requires a different understanding of what ‘responsibility’ means in each case. For Kanai, ‘the horror’ was not just the number of people being killed weekly but also the fact ‘that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings’ (248). He is willing to accept that people like him, Indians of his class, are complicit in what he calls ‘genocide’ by ignoring the suffering of the poorest of the poor ‘to curry favor with their Western patrons’, and blames it on people like Piya who disregard human costs while pushing to protect wildlife (248-9). Inadvertently, the tiger becomes a scapegoat, a sacrificial symbol of violence, for the past-and-present sufferings of humans and is implicitly presented as being expendable.²¹ These macronarratives²² of colonisation addressed by Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide*, whether of Hamilton’s project or the fate of the tiger in national parks, continue to shift between the repercussions of past human actions and the continued violations. The complexity of guilt in these narratives involve everyone – Piya the foreigner, and Kanai the native – as, in different ways, both are indoctrinated in an education that has its roots in the colonial heritage.

European Science and Native Agency of Faith

Science, as employed by the colonisers, and its inherent compulsion to conquer the non-human subject by way of documentation and classification, is a strong theme in *The Hungry Tide*. The Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcella brevirostris*, the subject of Piya’s research work, was discovered and named in India. To follow in the footsteps of the men of science who had written the earliest scientific records of the river dolphin, is something akin to a pilgrimage for her (188). She visits Kolkata’s Botanical Gardens where naturalist William Roxburgh wrote his famous article on the ‘discovery’ of the world’s first river dolphin and where Roxburgh’s assistant John Anderson adopted an infant Gangetic dolphin that he kept in his bathtub for several weeks. As Piya narrates the story of the race between different naturalists to identify and study the two kinds of dolphins, those that live in fresh water and those that live in sea water, both found to be anatomically similar even though they did not mix, the deeply embedded colonial motive to name in order to claim is foregrounded.

Kanai also shares a similar story of scientific discovery with Piya, that of Henry Piddington, a shipping inspector who invented the word ‘cyclone’. Piddington was the first to insist that the mangroves were protecting Bengal from the fury of the sea by absorbing tidal surges. His prediction that denuding the forests would endanger the whole ecosystem was proven right in a few years when a tidal wave destroyed the British administration’s plans to build a great port in the Sundarbans, an act of nature asserting itself over human agency, and an ominous precursor

²¹Huggan and Tiffin 190.

²² Walter D. Mignolo conceives of macronarratives ‘as a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies’ without which it would be impossible ‘to displace the “abstract universalism” of modern epistemology and world history.’ The emphasis that this concept of macronarratives places on the connectivity and reciprocity of various local histories is indispensable for any study of colonialism that seeks to be interdisciplinary. See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 22.

of the novel's climax. The pleasure in anecdotes about great scientific breakthroughs is a clear bond between Piya and Kanai. Given the novel's detailed recountings of this hagiography of the Heroic Scientist, it would seem key to Ghosh's novelistic construction. This pleasure is not entirely lost even if, as happens in the novel, nature overturns some of science's best-laid plans.

Piya clearly sees herself as inheriting and continuing the work of the British naturalists who had found the cetaceans in the Gangetic waters. 'It had fallen to her to be the first to carry back a report of the current situation and she knew she could not turn back from the responsibility' (247). Science thereby becomes a personal responsibility. Piya's contemplation of the 'silence' in the years between the work of the colonial men of science and her own efforts expose the dominance of scientific discourses. In the novel, this plays out in the realm of the historical, where recorded and remembered events question the concept of objective scientific truth while privileging social and cultural subjectivities.

For Piya, nonetheless, there is the lure of finding 'a hypothesis of stunning elegance and economy – a thing of beauty rarely found in the messy domain of mammalian behaviour' (104). The domain of nature is 'messy' because it does not easily serve the empiricist purposes of scientific research. Observing the daily migratory patterns of the dolphins, she is struck by the idea that this might be caused by an adaptation of the species' behaviour to tidal ecology. Proving such a hypothesis would offer immense possibility for conservation and protection of the species, but Piya's thoughts also wander to what it would imply for her career, and she imagines herself with a monumental project similar to Jane Goodall or Helene Marsh, 'so dazzling was the universe of possibilities that opened in her mind' (105). She is aware that it is these mythologies of discovery, whether Newton or Archimedes, that first drew her to science and that it is not just for the animals that she does what she does (106). However, this quest for professional distinction is not without its pitfalls. 'I have no home, no money and no prospects ... On top of that is the knowledge that what I am doing is more or less futile' (249). This idea of the futility of human enterprise, especially of scientific projects, gathers momentum towards the end of the novel when the sea takes complete control of the tidal landscape and the need to study nature is replaced by a need to survive it.

As Ghosh pits Piya's Western scientific training against Fokir's fisherman's instincts, it is suggested that she is lost in the habitat of the creature she studies, while Fokir has the advantage of being more integrated with his environment. Flashing cards with dolphin pictures has been Piya's method of gathering information from local people across the world in order to do her research, all her scientific training falling short without the practical guidance of native informants. While this practice of flashing cards seems innocuous and utilitarian, Ghosh uses this to signal the fact, easily forgotten, that though the novel is in English, few people in the novel can speak it. It may be commented on here though, that Ghosh, in having Fokir simply and passively respond to picture and gestures, is in real danger of simply re-stereotyping the subaltern as being without language and enunciation. Indeed, the construction of the taciturn fisherman is dubious – this is exactly the subject-position which should have been pivotal.

Fokir believes that the dolphins are messengers of Bon Bibi, divine repositories of the secrets of the tides, and his family lore told him that if he learned to follow the dolphins, he would always be able to find fish (254). The difference in their perception and purpose is considerable, as Kanai caustically reminds Piya, 'What you see as fauna he sees as food' (222). While Piya continues to track the dolphins and make notes using advanced technology and equipment, Fokir

is busy with his own work of catching crabs, with nothing more than a nylon line weighed down with pieces of tile and fish bone. It is only through a mutual engagement with place that the American cetologist and the Indian fisherman who speak different languages are able to bond; the river that brings them to each other, the tides that carry them to the dolphins, the crocodiles they watch warily, the rainbow formed by the moon that they enjoy together, the mangrove forests they walk through and finally the tidal storm that threatens their existence.

In this context, it is pertinent to consider Ursula H. Heise's suggestion that, in the face of increasing connections around the world, what is crucial for ecological awareness and environmental ethics is arguably not so much a sense of place as a sense of planet.²³ For postcolonial studies, this would inevitably lead to questioning *whose* sense of planet is at stake. Heise addresses these concerns of erasure of political and cultural differences by pointing out that identities shaped by region 'tended to be viewed as oppressive' while those that are diasporic 'are more politically progressive.'²⁴ In Piya and Fokir's unspoken empathy, Ghosh is bringing closer these two modes of interacting with the environment, the indigenous wisdom of the subaltern and the scientific sensibilities of the global cosmopolitan, revealing them to be complementary rather than contradictory.

The mythology and oral tradition of Bon Bibi (the goddess of the forest), first explored through Nirmal's experiences and diary entries, is another conciliatory component of the story. Piya and Kanai encounter it again in the singing of Fokir and during their visits to the shrine of the goddess. This traditional narrative, distinguished by combining elements of both Hindu and Muslim faith, and hence subordinating social differences to pay obeisance to the forces of nature, gives the figure of Bon Bibi dominion over the fate of those living in one half of the mangroves while the other half is reigned over by Dokkin Rai, a demon-king. The cautionary tale against indiscriminate exploitation of nature has been preserved through these archetypes of good and evil. 'Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order' (86). The factor of human greed in the colonisation of nature is a key element of the myth; great suffering caused when people set out to barter their morality for wealth from the forest and redemption coming only from complete surrender to the powers of the goddess, reinstating 'the law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded' (88). As a song-cycle, this narrative adds to the texture of the novel, almost a parallel to the verses from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* that Nirmal continually evokes. Embedded deep into the gathering plotlines of the novel, these resonances of dependence and faith in stories, in poetics, prepares the reader for the elegiac resolution. Kanai translates Fokir's songs of Bon Bibi for Piya – this is a moment in the novel, ripe for novelistic self-reflection. Does Ghosh's novelisation mirror Kanai's translation, as a higher order translation of the problems of the Sunderbans for a global audience? However, it would seem that Ghosh declines to give space to this question. Later too, in the novel Kanai reconstructs Nirmal's diary (a transcription of refugee-narratives) – this device, of indirect reconstructions,

²³ Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) 55.

²⁴ Heise 57.

should have been a moment of reflection on the novel-form, the paucity and elisions of memory and narrative that make any representation of the Sunderbans a fraught exercise. Yet Ghosh, despite evoking techniques that can bring these elisions to the surface, does not mine them to ask questions of the project as a whole – he seems content with a fairly cursory notion of social realism, where all viewpoints are simply presented for the reader on an equalising ontological plane.

The Bon Bibi folklore brings into focus a practice in Indian traditional societies of maintaining an ecological niche, a small wilderness area not tampered with by humans, as in the case of sacred groves. In precolonial India, a diversity of arrangements existed for communal management of forest which included leaving certain portions untouched, religious prescription, and communal sanction.²⁵ In the Sunderbans, this effort to prevent human intervention in matters of land stems from a respect for the predatory forces. Dokkin Ray is believed to be the god of the tiger in these regions²⁶ and the villagers in *The Hungry Tide* do not mention the name of the tiger for fear that doing so will beckon the creature. These mythic renditions of indigenous ecology acknowledge that human interests are protected through subordination to the interests of nature and construct a resistant discourse to colonial notions of ecological management.

The Rising of the Sea

Terri Tomskey writes that *The Hungry Tide* ‘engages the overwhelming question: how should we, as readers and writers, position ourselves in relation to today’s geographical inequalities in spaces that are both conceptually and geographically distant?’²⁷ As outsiders to the Sunderbans, Kanai and Piya are more conscious than the local characters of how many overlapping histories have constructed their understanding of this place, but at the same time, their present realities are being constantly moulded by the beauty and unpredictability of the tide country. They are deeply moved by it, and Alexa Weik considers this as a lesson in the novel that ‘affective attachment to place can be a choice: one that binds one both broadly and narrowly to others, and that does not necessarily require nativity or even permanence.’²⁸ The affect can nonetheless turn out to be short-lived and evanescent, as Kanai finds out when an altercation with Fokir leaves him alone on an island with the threat of man-eating tigers, leading to an emotional and physical meltdown. For a man who makes a living from translating languages, Kanai is strangely stripped of all articulation when abandoned in the forest, with that which ‘could not be apprehended or understood’ without words (272). This ‘failure of representation continues to haunt the translator’ for the remainder of the novel.²⁹ Even as regional cosmopolitan languages struggle with their limitations and becomes subservient to intuition and experience, Kanai finds himself looking into the face of a tiger. He flees from it towards a search party who disbelieve his tiger

²⁵ K. Shivaramakrishnan, ‘Histories of Colonialism and Forestry in India’, *Nature’s Past: The Environment and Human History* edited by Paolo Squatriti (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) 103-44.

²⁶ Rabindranath De, *The Sunderbans* (Kolkata: Oxford UP, 1990) 46.

²⁷ Terri Tomskey, ‘Amitav Ghosh’s Anxious Witnessing and the Ethics of Action in *The Hungry Tide*’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 44.1 (2009) 53-65.

²⁸ Alexa Weik, ‘The Home, the Tide and the World: Eco-Cosmopolitan Encounters in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*’, *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 13.1-14.2 (2006) 120-41.

²⁹ Robert P. Marzec, ‘Speaking Before the Environment: Modern Fiction and the Ecological’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (2009) 419-22.

story for lack of supporting evidence. Had he imagined it all? Had his fears taken on a tiger form? Kanai decides to return to Delhi, confessing to Piya that what happened took him out of his element. Piya is soon to find that she is out of her element there too, but her choices are different. In the climax of the novel, when the cyclone charged tide rises from the sea to claim its supremacy over the landscape, human and non-human lives, all their personal histories and collective histories collapse and they find themselves at the mercy of nature that cannot be predicted.

Piya ventures out with Fokir in his small boat to explore one of the routes of the dolphins, unaware that a storm is moving towards them. For the first time since they have been out looking for the dolphins together, Fokir's instincts seem to be faltering. The dolphins knew something he did not, and he had no access to the warnings put out by the weather office in New Delhi that a cyclone might be heading in their direction. The storm sequence in *The Hungry Tide* is remarkable, not just for the storytelling and the detailed account of what happens in the eye of the storm, but for projecting the power of nature over even the multiplicity of human narratives. Barely has the storm made its presence felt, when all of Piya's expensive scientific equipment as well as her painstakingly filled data sheets are ripped off from Kanai's boat 'to become a small speck in the inky sky' (307). A few miles away, Kanai is wading across a small stretch of river when the strong winds knock his uncle Nirmal's diary out of his hands and it sinks out of sight. The diary represented an act of rebellion against the tyranny of history, the only way of transcribing the experiences of a large group of people who had no avenues to make their voices heard to policy makers. The suppressed history of oppression of the Bangladeshi refugees that Nirmal had wished to record for posterity, his words of idealism and plea for empathy, are all lost in the very tides that he had adored.

This peeling away of different kinds of human records and histories makes a fascinating parallel movement to that of the main action of the tide taking unquestioned control of the physical world. It is not only Nirmal's notebook and Piya's data that are destroyed, but also the shrine of Bon Bibi in which Fokir and his people placed so much trust to protect them from the dangers of the tide country. Piya and Fokir watch its bamboo structure go hurtling over their heads, along with clumps of mangroves, as they tie themselves to the branch of a tree. It isn't long before the storm arrives in full fury. 'It was as if a city block had suddenly begun to move: the river was like pavement lying at its feet, while its crest reared high above, dwarfing the tallest trees' (315). Piya and Fokir emerge from this wave to see other life forms that have been moving with the eye of the storm, like the tired white bird that Piya picks up and the tiger that pulls itself out of the water a few hundred yards away. Human, bird, and animal, all are equally battered by the storm, equally desperate to survive. Suddenly all constructed hierarchies of life forms become redundant. Instead there is the connection of life. 'Without blinking, the tiger watched them for several minutes; during this time it made no movement other than to twitch its tail. She could imagine that if she had been able to put a hand on its coat, she would have been able to feel the pounding of its heart' (321). The storm erases differences between species.

Tied to each other and to the branch of a tree, Piya and Fokir are now one entity, a highly diminished one in comparison to the power of the wind and water. 'It was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one' (321). This symbolic sexual union reinforces the propensity of nature to act as a leveller, marginalising the differences in their upbringings, and encapsulating their different realms of expertise into a

hybridisation of knowledge. But the storm that fuses their lives also has the power to deny it to them. An uprooted stump hits Fokir as the storm returns from the opposite direction. There is nothing Piya can do except hold a bottle of water to his lips as he is dying and try to find the words to tell him how richly he was loved. The storm's gift, in Mukherjee's reading, 'is Fokir's death and the birth in Piya of a sense of place, the final abandoning of the "field".'³⁰ The cyclone serves as a complex node of narrative closure. Unlike the tiger, here, the non-human truly cannot be tamed, and is destructive in a profound way – Piya's notes are lost, Nirmal's diary sinks in the water, Fokir dies. The healing of the wound provides the only sort of tentative closure that a novel like this can sustain – Piya strives to continue the project in Fokir's name, and Kanai decides to re-create Nirmal's diary from memory. The novelistic death of the subaltern in this instance is deeply unsatisfying – Ghosh seems to have preferred the neatness of mourning, for the ambivalence of the fisherman's articulations, anger, resistance and politics.

The traditional, colonial, and ecological narratives about the Sunderbans that the tide had ripped through and threatened to completely obliterate are being resurrected and rewritten with a new wisdom. The close encounter with the destruction of nature has made an indelible impact on the characters, and they continue to engage with and aspire for a more embodied experience of place.

In *The Hungry Tide*, which consciously grapples with colonial impact and ecological consciousness, the environmental imagination becomes a causeway to 'rethink oppositions between bioregionalism and cosmopolitanism, between transcendentalism and transnationalism, between an ethics of place and the experience of displacement.'³¹ For Ghosh, the novel takes the form of the historical narrative, one which reflects developmental rationality as the predominant colonising force over nature, wherein 'there is no place so remote as to escape the flood of history' (65). The only available means to access, retell and decolonise nature is consequently through the fertile reciprocity of historical narratives and environmental imaginaries.

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³⁰ Mukherjee, 'Surfing' 156.

³¹ Nixon 247.